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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 001423

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: AMAL AND AOUN IN GAME OF BRINKSMANSHIP

REF: A. BEIRUT 1343

[¶](#)B. BEIRUT 1334

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[¶](#)1. (C) Both Amal and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) continue to dig in their heels in their efforts to determine Lebanon's next president. While Amal's strategy focuses on the constitution (which it interprets to require a two-thirds quorum to elect president) to ensure a candidate of its liking, the FPM argues principles of popular legitimacy to support its claim that its leader, General Michel Aoun, deserves the crown. Neither side appears set to blink, with both pursuing an all-or-nothing approach -- combined with a not-so-subtle threat of impending political chaos should they not prevail. The two strategies share the same end goal: ensuring their candidate reaches Baabda Palace. However, Amal's apparent acknowledgment that an Aoun presidency is not in the cards seems at odds with the FPM's assertion that Aoun is the rightful heir to the throne -- or is it? End summary.

[¶](#)2. (C) Pol/Econ Chief met with Ali Hamdan, senior advisor of Parliament Speaker and Amal leader Nabih Berri, on September 5, and Gebran Bassil, senior advisor and son-in-law of Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader General Michel Aoun on September 13, to discuss Lebanon's upcoming presidential election in the wake of Berri's August 31 "compromise" on a national unity government prior to the election (Ref A). In what were both frank, amicable, but also heated discussions, the two advisors stuck closely to their talking points, insisting that a compromise candidate (in the FPM's case, General Aoun) was the only way to unify the country and avoid political chaos or even civil war.

AMAL: INSISTING ON TWO-THIRDS QUORUM

[¶](#)3. (C) In their September 5 meeting, Hamdan reiterated the opposition's insistence on the presence of a two-thirds quorum for any voting to take place. Pol/Econ Chief said Berri's "concession" on the national unity government could easily be interpreted by a distrustful March 14 majority as yet another attempt by the opposition to gain a veto over March 14's candidate. From March 14's perspective, the opposition is conceding nothing, since the creation of a national unity government this close to the presidential

election (after which the new president will form a new government) is pointless; but it is asking for a great deal in terms of de facto veto power. March 14 therefore has no incentive to negotiate, especially when its interpretation of the constitution, arguably valid, says a two-thirds quorum is not required (except, some say, for the first round, but not all agree even on that). To overcome the majority's suspicion of March 8's motives, Pol/Econ Chief suggested, Berri's "concession" might carry more credibility if accompanied by a genuine goodwill gesture, such as removal of the (now mainly empty and mostly symbolic) tent city that has occupied downtown Beirut for over nine months, rather than by the opposition's continuing threat of obstructionism -- or worse -- should the majority not comply with its demands.

¶4. (C) Hamdan rejected March 14's interpretation of the constitution regarding the two-thirds quorum, claiming it was the opposition's right. Furthermore, electing a president by absolute majority not only would set a bad precedent but would also further divide a country that badly needs a consensus president to pull it together; a purely March 14 president would not enjoy the support of half of the population and would lead to a weak government or even civil war. A consensus candidate, on the other hand, could serve as "referee" among Lebanon's different sectarian groups. As for a goodwill gesture, Hamdan said the opposition already has paid a large price in terms of concessions to March 14; why should it pay more?

¶5. (C) Pol/Econ Chief pushed back, stressing that it was in the opposition's interest not to let the election be delayed until the last ten days, since that increased the likelihood of a candidate being elected by absolute majority. Instead, the opposition should focus on how to come to an agreement

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with March 14, i.e., by agreeing now on a compromise candidate, in return perhaps for more representation in the next government. This would obviate the argument over the necessary quorum and, if done in connection with some sort of goodwill gesture on March 8's part, could help reestablish trust between the two sides and lead to a true consensus president.

AND THEN THERE WERE...TWO?  
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¶6. (C) Hamdan's most candid moment, perhaps, was when he essentially acknowledged that of the four candidates short-listed during the Ambassador's August 30 meeting with Berri (Ref B) -- Nassib Lahoud, Boutros Harb, Robert Ghanem, and Jean Obeid -- only two would remain as viable candidates. Hizballah would never accept Lahoud; therefore the final contest probably would be between the two middle contestants, Harb and Ghanem, he said, suggesting that the opposition would have no objections to this scenario. (Hamdan at one point tried to reinsert Obeid into the equation, but quickly backed off when Pol/Econ Chief noted that, just as the opposition would never accept Lahoud, March 14 would probably view Obeid at the other, more pro-Syrian, end of the spectrum.) General Aoun had been "taken care of," Hamdan said, "he understands he can't be the compromise candidate."

¶7. (C) Why not then, Pol/Econ Chief asked, since Berri has already told us March 8 has no objection to either of these candidates, just let the elections proceed, without preconditions? March 8 would have nothing to lose by giving it a try, perhaps for a predetermined trial period, i.e., from September 25 to October 25. Then, if the two sides are unable to elect a president, the opposition could revert to its insistence on a two-thirds quorum. Furthermore, if the opposition demonstrated its goodwill going into the election by removing the tents, it could always reinstall them later. Hamdan seemed interested in the idea of a trial period, and promised to look for some sort of goodwill gesture. However, in an email following the meeting (obviously sent after he

had had an opportunity to consult with his superiors), he said the opposition would continue to insist on the two-thirds quorum during the entire 60-day election period.

WHAT IS THE US AFRAID OF?

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¶ 8. (C) Turning our argument on its head (in his August 30 meeting with the Speaker, the Ambassador repeatedly asked Berri what the opposition had to fear from a president elected by simple majority vote, especially since, as Berri himself admitted, none of March 14's potential candidates posed any problems for March 8), Hamdan asked what the US feared from a two-thirds quorum. Refusing to take the bait, Pol/Econ Chief replied that the only US concern was that Lebanon's next president not be imposed from outside; that instead, the elections take place on time and in accordance with the Lebanese constitution. The opposition's insistence on the two-thirds quorum, however, risked delaying election of the new president until the final 10 day period, when the majority's argument that it has the right to choose using an absolute majority appears to have merit. If March 8 truly wanted a compromise candidate, it should seek to resolve the issue before the final ten days, and the only way to do that would be to engage in discussions with the majority without any conditions.

AOUN: A PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE FOR ALL SEASONS

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¶ 9. (C) General Aoun reaffirmed his candidacy for the presidency (not that we had any doubts) on September 10, declaring himself ready to play the role of either a "consensus candidate" or "confrontation candidate." Stressing principles over constitutional procedures, Bassil asserted Aoun's right to the presidency based on popular support. He claimed polls indicated the FPM enjoys the support of 65 percent of Lebanon's Christian voters and, together with its March 8 allies, 65 percent of the total vote. Furthermore, Bassil said, Aoun is the only candidate with a vision and plan for Lebanon's independence, democracy, militias, Hizballah's arms, and fighting corruption. The FPM's 2006 MOU with Hizballah is still the best strategy for reigning in Hizballah's arms, he argued, but the US and March

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14's strategy of confrontation is creating the opposite effect of strengthening Hizballah's resolve to keep them.

¶ 10. (C) Furthermore, Bassil continued, the Siniora government, deprived of popular support and lacking Shia representation in the cabinet, is ruling in the name of the minority. The 2005 parliamentary elections were based on a Syrian electoral law that disadvantaged the Christians. The FPM contested 11 seats but the issue remained unresolved because the government dissolved the constitutional court, preventing it from ruling. The November 2006 walk-out of five Shia cabinet members, depriving it of its mandatory confessional representation, further eroded the government's legitimacy, he said.

FREE PATRIOTIC MOVEMENT: WE WILL NOT BE NEGLECTED

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¶ 11. (C) Bassil bristled when asked whether Aoun had the support of his March 8 allies, rejecting any suggestion that the General was not on Berri's list of compromise candidates, though he admitted he had heard this from "at least 20 sources." (Note: Aoun dismissed any prospect of an Aoun candidacy in his August 30 meeting with the Ambassador Ref B furthermore, we understand Michel Murr, a staunch March 8 ally, has also shared the unpleasant news with Bassil. End note.) Echoing the General's assertions, Bassil said Amal and Hizballah will support Aoun.

¶ 12. (C) Asked whether there was any scenario under which Aoun

would relinquish his presidential claims, Bassil responded that the FPM would only give up that right if a truly better solution was presented -- and the FPM was guaranteed a role in the next government. Citing rumors of a two-year transitional presidency, Bassil said the FPM might accept the idea if it were to get something in return. It was time for the FPM to put its foot down, he declared; it had been deprived of its rightful place in the government for too long.

¶13. (C) March 14 had rejected every initiative offered, including Aoun's calls immediately following the 2006 war for a national unity government. Bassil said his attempts to dialogue with PM Siniora's senior advisor, Mohamed Chatah, had been rebuffed, and the ball was in Chatah's court. He used the analogy of a robbery, claiming the FPM (the victim) had tried every means possible to get justice: first, by attempting to negotiate with the thief, asking for a small percentage of the confiscated goods to be returned; when that failed, the victim appealed to the courts, but since the court had been disbanded, he got no relief there either; having tried every peaceful means possible, the only option left to the victim was to retake his lawful possession by force. March 8 had offered March 14 every opportunity to say no, Bassil concluded; since they continued to refuse, the opposition had no choice but to play hard ball.

#### SUPPORT FOR BERRI INITIATIVE

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¶14. (C) When asked why the opposition was insisting on a two-thirds quorum, Bassil admitted openly that the goal behind Berri's recent initiative was to give the opposition a say over the presidency. Furthermore, it was an attempt by Berri to counter Sunni influence over the presidency. Finally, Bassil claimed, Berri was genuinely trying to find a solution to the political crisis. MPs have a right to boycott parliament, he stated, citing an example Berri also has used that the Lebanese Forces thwarted the convening of parliament in 1988 to block the election of what they viewed as a "Syrian candidate," former President Suleiman Franjieh.

¶15. (C) March 14 was stalling for time, Bassil argued, in order to impose its own president at that last minute. However, it would be unable to use the final ten day period before Lahoud's mandate expires (during which the constitution says parliament must elect a president and March 14 argues a two-thirds quorum is not required) to do so; according to Article 73, the ten days only comes into play if the Speaker fails to convene parliament during the previous 50 day period, but Berri will do so.

#### COMMENT

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¶16. (C) Aoun's "C'est moi l'etat" approach strikes us as almost delusional, given the apparent lack of support from Amal and Hizballah. In what it seems to view as an existential battle, the FPM is sticking to its guns in hopes that, if Aoun doesn't win the title now, he will secure it in two years, and in return the FPM will receive the guarantees it so badly craves that it remains a serious player in the game. The wily Bassil certainly realizes that the FPM cannot win its case based on constitutional procedures. It has therefore adopted another line of attack that undoubtedly sits well with many disenfranchised Christians, questioning the very legitimacy of the entire political system, which it argues has deprived the Christians (or at least those who are members of the FPM) of their rightful representation in government.

¶17. (C) The more realistic Berri, knowing March 14 will never accept an Aoun presidency, speaks only of the need for a compromise candidate, paying lip-service to the FPM while

privately admitting to us that Aoun is not on the short-list of candidates. A franker than usual Hamdan engaged in serious discussion about ideas for resolving the impasse, resorting only infrequently to March 8's usual rhetoric about safeguarding the country's institutions and the dangers March 14's actions would pose for national unity. In the end, however, despite indications that he would sincerely "look for ways" for March 8 to demonstrate its genuine good will, it became clear that any ground we made was quickly quashed once he had reported back to his superiors.

¶18. (C) Bassil may have inadvertently given us an insight into Berri's ace in the sleeve, should March 14 refuse to agree on the two-thirds quorum. Berri has said over and over again that he will convene parliament on September 25 in a grand display of his good intentions to allow the election to take place. This may be yet another Berri trap; by convening parliament, regardless of how many MPs actually show up, the Speaker arguably removes any justification for Article 73 to be invoked (Article 73 calls the last ten day scenario into play if the Speaker has not/not convened parliament for the purpose of electing a president). Although Berri himself has admitted that an absolute majority suffices during this ten day period, the issue becomes moot if he can legitimately argue that, because he did indeed convene parliament, the ten day period and its rules do not apply. Any attempts by the government majority to proceed would be further fodder for the opposition's claims that it is acting illegitimately, further justifying March 8's taking action into its own hands, whether by creating a second government, preventing MPs from voting (thus creating the dreaded presidential vacuum), or imposing a military president who can "save the country." The latter scenario has the suspicious convenience of marrying Amal's insistence on its constitutional rights (which it would claim had been violated) with the FPM's claims of popular legitimacy and support. A marriage made not in heaven but out of a common anti-Sunni, anti-March 14 tactical alliance whose end result, despite Berri's assertion to the contrary, could well be an Aoun presidency.

FELTMAN